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Publications : What Sexual Scientists Know... : About Rape

What is Rape?

A general definition of *rape* or *sexual assault* involves forced or nonconsensual sexual acts. Legal definitions vary from one jurisdiction to another regarding what sexual behaviors are covered, who is covered, and what counts as force or lack of consent.

Regarding what sexual behaviors are covered, some jurisdictions (e.g., Canada and some U.S. states) have laws against sexual assault, covering unwanted sexual behaviors ranging from sexual touching to penetration (i.e., penile-vaginal intercourse, oral and anal sex, and sexual penetration with objects). Other jurisdictions have laws against rape, covering only sexual penetration; other laws (e.g., laws against sexual battery) criminalize nonpenetrative offenses.

Regarding who is covered, sexual assault laws are often gender neutral. Rape laws often cover only women as victims or only men as perpetrators; other laws (e.g., sodomy laws) cover male victims or female perpetrators. For centuries, laws contained a "marital exemption" in which husbands could not be charged with raping their wives. Currently, marital rape is a crime in many countries (e.g., Australia, Belgium, Canada, China, Costa Rica, Denmark, England, France, Ireland, Israel, Japan, Norway, Scotland, South Africa, Sweden and all 50 U.S. states).

Regarding what counts as force or lack of consent, most laws include physical force and threats of force but not other threats (e.g., threats of divorce). In many jurisdictions, engaging in sexual acts with someone is illegal if that person is incapacitated (e.g., by intoxication or mental illness) and hence unable to give informed consent.

For perpetrators to be prosecuted, legal definitions are important, but for other purposes, such as seeking help from a therapist or rape crisis center, it is unimportant whether an experience meets any legal definition. Sometimes political activists suggest definitions broader than legal definitions in order to challenge widely held assumptions about what is acceptable in sexual relations. For example, some feminist activists have defined sexual activity as rape under some circumstances even if the woman consents, such as if she consented only because she feared negative social repercussions or if she subsequently felt violated. They do not call for legal action in such cases, but they encourage people to reevaluate their relationships.

How Prevalent Is Rape?

Estimates depend on how rape is defined and measured. Estimates based on police statistics are virtually useless because most rapes are never reported to authorities. Research suggests that in the U.S., approximately 12% of adolescent girls and 20% of adult women have been raped (based on definitions that include penetration by not touching). Studies of female college students showed that approximately 15% in the U.S., and 14% in New Zealand, and 12% in the United Kingdom had been raped by force or while intoxicated; approximately 8% in Canada and 8% in South Korea had been raped by force, excluding intoxication (these percentages may not be directly comparable across countries due to methodological difference). When researchers use gender-neutral definitions, they find that many more women than men have been raped and that many more men than women have been perpetrators. However, some men have been raped (usually by other men, sometimes by women), and some women have been perpetrators (sometimes against other women, sometimes against men). Across countries, most perpetrators are acquaintances of the victim - often dating partners or spouses.

Social Foundations of Rape

Cross-cultural research has shown that rape is most common in cultures characterized by male dominance (e.g., political decision making dominated by males) and by violence (e.g., the ideology of male toughness, interpersonal violence, war). Within a culture, people with more traditional or sexist gender role attitudes are more tolerant of rape than are people with more nontraditional or egalitarian attitudes. Traditional men are more likely to report that they would commit rape if they knew they would not be caught; some

researchers have found that traditional men are more likely than nontraditional men actually to commit rape. Many attitudes within our culture perpetuate rape - for example, "A husband is entitled to have sex with his wife," "A 'real man' never passes up a chance to have sex," and, "A women who 'leads a man on' deserves what she gets."

Some media depictions may promote rape. For example, in some studies, men are randomly assigned to view either (a) neutral movies or (b) movies that make violence appear attractive or that convey myths about rape (e.g., slasher films that make violence seem exciting, or movies suggesting that women like to be forced to have sex or that women's only value is to satisfy men). Most studies show that men who see these violent movies are, on the average, more likely to say that they would commit rape, to minimize the trauma experienced by victims, and to endorse rape myths (e.g., the myth that women enjoy being forced to have sex). Not all men respond this way, however, and attitudes do not necessarily predict behavior. Sexually explicit material that is nonviolent does not have these effects.

Sexually aggressive men are more likely than other men to have had early sexual experience (both forced and voluntary), to hold attitudes justifying rape, to be hostile toward women, to use alcohol frequently, to be part of peer groups that discuss women in highly sexualized terms, and to become sexually aroused by depictions of rape.

Consequences of Rape

The consequences of rape vary, being more extensive for some persons than for others. Typically, consequences are most severe during the first week of post rape, diminish during the next two to three months, and then plateau. As discussed later, getting assistance can be helpful. Psychological consequences can include fear, anxiety, phobias and panic disorder, depression, suicidal thoughts and attempts, anger, lower self-esteem, feelings of guilt, fatigue, problems with trust, problems with social adjustment, and alcohol and drug abuse. Sexual consequences can include decreased sexual satisfaction, increased sexual dysfunctions, avoidance of sex, and engaging in sex indiscriminately, perhaps because victims feel as if they have nothing left to protect. Physical consequences can include physical injury, pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases, and psychosomatic problems related to stress. Many of the consequences of rape can be conceptualized as post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), similar to consequences experienced by combat veterans. PTSD involves persistent reexperiencing of the rape (e.g., in thoughts, flashbacks, or nightmares); avoidance of thoughts, feelings, or situation associated with the rape, or feeling numb, detached, or estranged from others; and heightened physiological arousal (e.g., hyper vigilance, an exaggerated startle response, difficulty with sleeping or concentrating, or irritability).

Contrary to stereotypes, the consequences of acquaintance rape are as serious as those of stranger rape. Rape by a friend, partner, or spouse involves a violation of trust and often makes victims doubt their judgment. Unlike stranger rape, rape by a spouse or partner is likely to occur repeatedly. Such rapes are often accompanied by battering. Victims must sometimes choose between living with the rapist and leaving. Leaving a marriage or other relationship can involve financial and emotional difficulties and does not guarantee protection from being raped.

Also contrary to stereotypes, when men are raped, consequences are similar to those experienced by women. Men may face harmful misconceptions, such as, "Men cannot be raped" or "If a man has an erection, he must want to have sex." Men raped by other men often question their own sexuality.

Telling others can lead to social problems, such as being disbelieved or blamed. For lesbians or gay men, telling someone about the rape can mean coming out - that is, revealing their sexual orientation - which could lead to discrimination. When others are supportive, however, talking about the rape can be therapeutic.

Rape crisis centers - usually staffed 24 hours a day - can provide advice, emotional support, accompaniment to the emergency room, advocacy in dealing with the legal system, and referrals to support groups. To locate one, look in the telephone book or, in the U.S., call (800) 656-HOPE for a referral.

Therapy can be helpful by providing support and helping with the particular consequences the victim is experiencing. With therapy and support from family and friends, people who have been raped can overcome the consequences and get on with their lives.

Preventing Rape

For too long, society's primary approach to preventing rape was to advise women to restrict their behavior, such as telling women, "Don't go out alone at night!" Such advice limits women's freedom; if women must restrict their lives because of the possibility of rape, then all women are victims, even those who have never

been raped. Such advice is also based on the erroneous assumption that most perpetrators are strangers.

Another approach is for individuals to empower themselves through self-defense training. Active resistance strategies, such as fighting, yelling, and fleeing, are more effective than passive strategies, such as pleading, crying, or offering no resistance. These techniques are not ideal, however: No strategy is totally effective, not everyone has the physical ability to resist, and attempted rape can be traumatic.

Ultimately, we must work to prevent rape by addressing its causes. Men can do peer education to change the attitudes of other men. Schools can present age-appropriate programs that challenge bullying in preschool and elementary years, that discuss consensual sex in later years, and that challenge sexism and emphasize respect in all years. We can challenge victim-blaming remarks and jokes that portray rape as funny. We can write letters to advertisers who sponsor ads or television shows that promote sexism or violence. We can consider how public policies affect women's social, economic, and political equality when we write to government officials and when we vote. Ultimately, only social change can prevent rape.

Recommended Readings

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